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ABSTRACT

An investigation explored whether preadolescent children have developed self-schemata which serve in making judgments about trait behavior for both self and others. Seventeen males and 23 females between the ages of 10 and 11 who attended a public elementary school on Long Island were interviewed. Children rated themselves relative to classmates with reference to traits of smartness, funniness, and neatness; indicated how important each trait was for his or her self-definition; completed three tasks of social problem solving, each of which corresponded to one of the target traits; and answered five prediction questions (first about a story character's future behavior and then about their own behavior). Results show that subjects had developed schemata on trait dimensions which function in predicting future behavior for themselves and others, when this behavior is related to schematic dimension. Children who rated themselves high on traits and those who rated themselves low (categorized as schematic and aschematic, respectively) did not differ in their predictions for behaviors unrelated to schematic dimensions. Schematic children made finer discriminations between schema-relevant and schema-irrelevant behaviors for both themselves and story characters. They also appeared to have more organized self-structures which serve as guides in making judgments for themselves and others, with the latter judgments not being egocentric generalizations from the former. (RH)

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The influence of children's self-schemata on self and other perceptions

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The psychological study of the self derives from the theories of James, Mead, as well as from the work of Sullivan. Taken together, these theorists postulated that the self was an organizing structure through which incoming sensory information was processed and interpreted. Applied to social perception, the self was regarded as an important factor in explaining the complexities of how we perceive others. The empirical investigation of these theories has shown that we use ourselves as cognitive anchors to describe others and make inferences about their characters and future behavior.

As you might be aware, recent work in adult social cognition has gone a step further in analyzing the self. Today, we've come to conceptualize the self as a system of cognitive structures which are organized into "self-schemata." According to the information processing model, self-schemata operate to integrate all the information known about the self in a given behavioral domain into a systematic framework used during processing, (Markus & Smith, 1981). By shifting the emphasis from a more traditional consideration of object features to an analysis of perceiver characteristics, Markus (1977) contributed greatly to the study of person perception. In her seminal study, she found that relative to subjects who did not rate themselves as strongly independent or dependent, i.e. aschematics, adults who did, schematics, had extreme ratings on a series of self-descriptive

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tasks and were better able to provide behavioral evidence to suppport these ratings. Moreover, schematics could more easily predict their future behavior in the schematic domain and they were more resistant to counterschematic information than were aschematics. Markus explained these findings by arguing that aschematics had no cognitive structure along the dimension of independence--dependence on which to base their responses.

To date, numerous researchers have provided support for the role of the self-schema in person perception. However, little research has been devoted to the study of the self-schema in children's person perception.

The studies that have examined the role of children's self-schemata in person perception have largely focused on sex-stereotyping and have used dependent measures of recognition and recall tasks, see for example Liben & Signorella (1980), Martin & Halverson (1983). These measures tell us little about trait-based self-schemata in social perception. Further, earlier research such as that conducted by Livesley and Bromley (1973) focused on the developmental changes in children's person perception and did not consider individual differences. Recent work by Heller and Berndt (1981) suggests that children understand trait concepts and use this information in making judgments about others. However, these investigators did not examine individual trait-based self-schemata and their influence

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in making predictions of behaviors for others.

In addition, previous studies have tended to use one trait dimension when examining the relationship between the self-schema and person perception, for example, Bem's (1981) investigation of sex-stereotyping and person perception. However, Markus (1977) has shown that people do not readily classify themselves on any number of trait dimensions. That is, someone may have a schema for being smart, but not generous. The issue of self-relevance may be important in investigating children's perceptions of others, for Markus has shown that relevant schemata influence the ease with which adults make predictions for behavior.

Based on work with adults and previous research with children, this investigation sought to explore whether children have developed self-schemata which serve in making judgments about their future behavior and that of another. Our study adds to the literature by giving explicit consideration to individual differences in how children perceive others, and by using dependent measures which incorporate problem solving and inference-making tasks. In addition, our study employed three traits instead of one in order to address the issue of self-relevance. Using only one trait dimension, such as independence, would have possibly eliminated many subjects for whom this trait was not important.

Our study was conducted with ten and eleven year old

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children because previous research by Barenboim (1981) has demonstrated that by this age, children have begun to use psychological constructs, i.e.trait terms, and psychological comparisons, for example, Mary is smarter than Ann. Given such findings, we predicted that the period between ten and eleven would mark the beginning of the use of self-schemata in making judgments about trait behavior for both the self and others.

Based on the foregoing, we predicted that:

1) children ages ten to eleven will have established a self-schema on at least one trait dimension.

Further, we also hypothesized that, relative to aschematics,

2) schematic children will be more likely to infer a fictional character's behavior to be trait consistent in a social dilemma task.

3) schematic children on a given trait dimension will make more confident predictions that their behavior and that of a character's will be trait consistent in the future. Predictions for behaviors unrelated to the schematic domain should not differ for schematics and aschematics.

4) schematics will evidence greater differentiation between their predictions of future behavior, with the likelihood of schema-consistent behavior being greater than predictions for schema-irrelevant behavior.

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METHODS

Subjects.We interviewed forty children between the ages of ten and eleven. 17 were male and 23 were female. The children came from a public elementary school on Long Island.

Procedure.Based on pilot testing, the traits chosen were smart, funny, and neat. Initially, children were asked to rate themselves along a continuum which was designed to tap their perceptions of themselves on each trait relative to their classmates. A unipolar scale was used for it was believed that children would not classify themselves on the negative pole of each dimension. For example, rate themselves as dumb on a bipolar scale of intelligence.

After making this rating, each subject then indicated how important each trait was for his or her self-definition on a five point scale. We then presented three tasks of social problem solving each corresponding to one of the target traits. These tasks were similar in format to the character dilemmas used by Cutrona and Feshbach (1979). Each story described another child, who was the same sex as the subject, as either neat, smart, or funny. Each story contained two supporting examples of trait-consistent behavior, as well as a situational constraint which compromised the trait behavior. For example, the smart character had to hurry from the library before it closed and was unable to take out the books she/he needed to write a report.

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The children were then asked to end the story by choosing one of three possible endings presented in random order: 1) maintaining the trait behavior, 2) compromising the trait behavior in light of situational demands, and 3) relinquishing the trait behavior.

For instance, the smart character could have received an excellent, average, or a failing grade on a report.

After the stories, the children answered five prediction questions pertaining to the story character's future behavior and then the same five questions about their own behavior, a procedure adopted from Heller and Berndt (1981). For example, children were asked whether the smart character would win a spelling bee if he/she chose to enter and whether they themselves would win a spelling bee if they chose to enter. Here we wanted to assess the children's confidence in making predictions for behaviors related to the schematic traits. Three questions were concerned with behavior related to the target trait, and two questions were concerned with unrelated, positive and negative behaviors which served as controls. Ratings for the predictions were made on five-point scales, consisting of circles of increasing size with endpoints of "not at all likely" and "very likely."

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RESULTS

Table 1 illustrates the main findings of our study.

Insert Table 1 about here

First, we divided subjects into schematics and aschematics on each trait dimension. These groups were based on self-description and importance ratings, a procedure similar to Markus (1977). However, our method of classifying children differed slightly from that of Markus (1977) because we used a unipolar scale instead of a bipolar one. In our study, children rated themselves as having more or less of a particular trait. Thus, schematics were those who fell at the high end of both scales and aschematics were those children who rated themselves at the low end of the two scales.

Distributions of ratings for each trait were different. Therefore, schematics and aschematics were those children who fell at the upper and lower 20 percent of each distribution, respectively.

Three chi square analyses, story resolution by schematic grouping, were performed for the character dilemmas to assess whether schematics relative to aschematics would resolve the

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story so as to maintain the trait. Contrary to expectations, responses did not vary as a function of schematic grouping.

The prediction questions used in this study were the most informative measures of how children's self-schemata operate in person perception.

The five prediction questions for each trait were each subjected to a 2 X 2 repeated measures ANOVA, (schematic versus aschematic by self versus other). Analyses of the prediction questions pertaining to future schema-consistent behavior revealed significant main effects for perceived neatness and intelligence. These findings suggest that, relative to aschematics, schematics on these dimensions were more confident in predicting that they and the character would behave in ways consistent with their schemata.

An interaction was found on this question for perceived humor, with funny schematics exhibiting more confidence in predicting their own behavior, while aschematics were more confident in the actor's behavior relative to their own. In addition, we found main effects for perceived intelligence and humor for the questions concerning trait-inconsistent behavior. Therefore, on the dimensions of intelligence and humor, schematics, in contrast to aschematics, were more confident that they and the actor would not engage in future behavior contrary to their schemata, for example, fail a test or be serious. As

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predicted, no significant differences were found on any of the control questions concerning schema-irrelvant behaviors, with schematics and aschematics predicting with equal confidence on these questions.

Pearson r correlations were conducted to determine the level of differentiation between the prediction questions. For all three traits, schematics evidenced greater differentiation between the predictions made for both themselves and the characters. That is, predictions made for schema-relevant and schema-irrelevant behaviors were not made with equal certainty. In addition, schematics made clearer distinctions between themselves and the characters on traits relevant to their schematic domain.

DISCUSSION

We've shown that ten and eleven year old children have developed schemata on trait dimensions which function in predicting future behavior for themselves and others when this behavior is related to the schematic dimension. Schematic and aschematic children do not differ in their predictions for behaviors unrelated to the schematic dimension. In contrast, schematic children make finer discriminations between schema-relevant and schema-irrelevant behaviors for both themselves and the characters. They also appear to have more organized self-structures which serve as guides in making

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judgments for themselves and others, with the latter judgments not being egocentric generalizations from the former. As found in adult studies, children's self-schemata inlfuence judgments related to the self and others in ways consistent with this schematic domain.

Future research should explore the relationship between perceptions of the self and others and the self-schema within a social context, using more refined measures of social problem solving and inferencing. The development of the self- schema should also be investigated in order to determine how children's psychological constructs become salient aspects of their self-perceptions. Finally, the self-schema should be examined within a developmental framework to evaluate the validity of this construct for explaining person perception in young children as well as its applicability to the child in general.

We think this study has value for the future study of children's self-perceptions and personality development. Our findings suggest that at a young age children are capable of making sophisticated dispositional attributions about their own behavior, and these attributions appear to influence judgments made about future behavior.

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Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and F-values for the prediction questions for self and other.

DIMENSION	MEANS	SD	DF	F-VALUE	P
NEAT					
TRAIT-CONSISTENT BEHAVIOR:					
SCHEMATICS	4.79	.40	(1,12)	5.16	.05
ASCHEMATICS	3.88	1.21			
FUNNY					
TRAIT-CONSISTENT BEHAVIOR:					
SCHEMATICS-SELF	3.88	1.25	(1,14)	2.91	.11
ASCHEMATICS-SELF	3.25	1.28			
SCHEMATICS-OTHER	3.65	.74			
ASCHEMATICS-OTHER	4.13	.84			
TRAIT-INCONSISTENT BEHAVIOR:					
SCHEMATICS	1.38	.77	(1,14)	3.43	.10
ASCHEMATICS	2.31	1.32			
SMART					
TRAIT-INCONSISTENT BEHAVIOR:					
SCHEMATICS	1.64	.82	(1,12)	12.12	.01
ASCHEMATICS	3.07	.97			

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